

# Perception is vital component of power plant issue

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The decision on placing a coal-fueled power plant in Sevier County is much larger than the “Just Do It,” or not slogans posted throughout the valley.

The more important issue in the decision making process, is to “Just Do It Right.”

Unfortunately, that isn't what happened when the Sevier County Planning Commission met in a closed door session last week.

The planning commission members, along with two county commissioners and the planning and zoning administrator, reportedly met to discuss legal issues with the county attorney.

While the agenda of the meeting may have met the criteria for being an executive - or closed door session, the meeting was not properly noticed or advertised. While it's not likely that anything nefarious occurred during the meeting, how the meeting was hosted creates serious problems.

This meeting was held in clear violation of Utah law, which states that any government meeting needs to be properly noticed, regardless of whether or not it is an open or closed session.

With an issue that has been as explosive as the power plant proposal, it is critical that every rule is not just followed, but exceeded wherever possible.

Utah's open meeting laws are designed to keep government open, and transparent.

The only meetings that are allowed to be held in executive session are those dealing with the purchase of real property, discussion of pending litigation or the discussion of personnel issues. Even these meetings are required to have minutes taken, and are also required to have proper notice.

Noticing allows the media and others to know why and when a government organization is meeting. Even if it is a closed session, people have the right to know when their officials are meeting.

While the planning commission was acting on the advice of the county attorney in how the meeting was organized and carried out, that does not protect it from the perception the closed door creates.

There are already people who feel the power plant proposal is a done deal, that was signed, sealed and approved behind locked doors, and that the public comment periods are nothing more than formalities.

By failing to give proper notice of a meeting, the perception created is not a good one for county government. It casts a shroud of doubt over the procedure that's being followed. It also, in this case, appears to be a clear violation of Utah law.

If the integrity of the process is compromised, so is the legitimacy of the decision to either approve or deny the power plant. A proposal that has had as much controversy and interest in it as the power plant can't afford to be anything but completely upfront, and in the light of public discourse.

Open meeting laws not only protect the public's right to know, they protect government bodies from themselves. By making every decision in a manner that allows for the public to see what is going on, accusations of corruption and shady dealing are avoided.

By hosting a meeting that was not properly noticed, the county has put the individual members of the planning commission at risk for being accused of not being above board with everything they do.

Those involved in county government have been dealing with the power plant issue for years now. They should know to notice every meeting, and follow every rule - because by not doing so, it will most assuredly come back to haunt Sevier County.

Whether the plant is to be built or not, the process has to be followed to the letter and intent of the law.

Hopefully, all government entities will adhere to and follow the philosophy behind Utah's open meeting laws.